Scheffer’s Patriotic Devotion of Six Burgers of Calais (Fig. 53), which he exhibited in the Salon of 1819, was an attempt to visualize corporate heroism as a compound of individual experience. After his victory at the battle of Crécy, Edward III of England besieged the city of Calais. The city surrendered after nearly a year’s siege. Edward promised to spare Calais’s inhabitants if six of its most prominent citizens sacrificed themselves. When these hostages appeared before him, he ordered their execution, but their lives were saved because of the pleas of his wife, Queen Philippa. The livret description stressed that it had been the suffering of the entire city (famine, looting, massacres, and executions) that had induced Eustache de Saint-Pierre and his supporters to sacrifice themselves. Scheffer’s innovative corporate conception of historical action becomes clear when we compare it to François-Anne David’s illustration of the same event in Caillot’s Histoire de France, représentée par les figures, entitled “Devotion of Six Inhabitants of Calais. 1347” (Fig. 54), published in the same year. Despite the plate’s title, despite the textual appellation “martyrs of patriotism,” David’s illustration focuses on Queen Philippa’s action; her tears and arguments succeed in softening Edward’s heart. The citizens await their fate, which is decided by the actions of their rulers. Scheffer’s interpretation was very different. Not only did he depict popular heroes, he depicted them taking heroic action as a group, through their choice of Starvation and death. As Thierry would write the next year, in the first of his letters on French history, Scheffer was attempting to fasten the soul of the spectator to the destiny of the group of people who had lived and suffered as we do in our own time. Thus, instead of the tearful pleading of a lovely queen, viewers saw the death march of the citizens of Calais. There is no physically impressive action. Weakened by famine, the group steps mildly out into the darkness. Rather than making the climax of the composition the decisive movement of the group toward the left, Scheffer tore apart the center to render the grief of leave-taking; arms are restrained and extended in a wave of emotion through the group of wives and children who have come to the gates. The stalwart band gazes in three directions: toward the destination pointed out by the soldier on the left; outward toward us; and back at the soldiers on the right. Visual unity was sacrificed to the truth of this patriotic self-sacrifice: a multilayered, emotionally complex truth that could not be summed up in one action.

The critics were torn between admiration of the subject of a work that “breathed love of country” and concern that its dark patriotism would alienate more viewers than it would inspire. The Liberal Jouy mentioned
Arnold's expulsion from France for sedition in his review of Ary's Salon painting about bourgeois self-sacrifice and praised the conception, expression, and execution. The classicist Landon and pro-Romantic Jal agreed on more than the relatively minor flaw of an overly dark visual tone. They were perplexed, even repulsed, by the realistic figures and fragmented composition. Landon approved of the moral message of the subject but disliked the crude figural types; he thought that the work was one of the Salon's best, but that Eustache de Saint-Pierre looked more like a criminal than a hero. Jal, more perceptively, worried that it was only too successful in arousing an empathetic response: how were patriotic emotions to be inspired by the sight of despairing victims?

Emeric-David saw many similarities between Ary Scheffer's Calais and Géricault's Raft of the Medusa (Fig. 55, Pl. 6). Not only were the themes and dark tonality comparable, as were the compositional choices: both of these scenes presented collective agony in multiple pathetic "episodes." Both Scheffer and Géricault had chosen to depict an extended emotional experience without a physical conclusion, instead of a visual instant of decisive physical action. Paradoxically, their compositional innovation should be seen as mandated by the traditional exhortation to history painters to depict truth rather than fact. Géricault believed that truth resided in suffering. His Raft of the Medusa, entitled for this Salon Scene of Shipwreck, released an event from a particular moment and from the closure of comprehension of a "message," a "meaning," a "moral." Instead, Géricault presented agonized existence: endless suffering, without localization, explanation, or consolation.

Instead of centrally framing an action, Géricault's composition presented a visual dynamic, straining outward in two opposing directions. One of the raft's sufferers, cropped by the frame, dangles into the viewer's space, as Delacroix noted. Others ignore the Argus on the horizon or strain with impotent energy toward it. In earlier studies, the Argus had been a clear salvation; here it was reduced to a faint possibility of rescue or even a delusion. Spectators were forced to question rather than witness, to identify with the experience of those on the raft. The inner lives of those sufferers are made manifest in their bodies, which do not seem "arranged" or "posed." Limbs in the water give evidence of the surrender to despair and death, clenching arms reached up to support those signaling for recognition and rescue. But winds and storms, visible in the billowing sail and taut ropes, drag the raft toward the left. Surrounding the spectator with the dead and dying, exploding compositional closure to ensure a continual, dynamic tension based on the visual and emotional strain of actors and spectators alike, cropping the foreground, extending a figure past the frame: all these compositional choices drew the viewer directly into empathetic experience, without permitting the intellectual distance of comprehension.

The critical reception, surprisingly, did not entirely follow political lines. Certainly, those who were impressed naturally approved of the theme (transparently an attack on government incompetence, which had already resulted in the removal of the minister of the marine), but even more fundamentally, they approved of a composition that was expressly ordered, one that rendered suffering instead of action. Jouy, who had admired Scheffer's Calais, recognized that this particular shipwreck,
a recent and well-known example of unparalleled suffering, justified the artist's composition. Critics in the opposing camp, those who supported the traditional distinction between the roles of history painting and genre painting, thought that a journalistic theme should not have been described in a monumental manner. Landon's extremely hostile and lengthy review detailed the artist's errors in subject, style, scale, solicitation of an audience. In his view, Géricault would have had a greater impact on his audience's emotions if he had opted for naturalistic documentation localized in time and space, expressing his vision in a small-scale, compositionally centered work. Instead, by using the colossal proportions of a history painting to describe such a terrible event, he had made a tactical error, for where could such an enormous painting hang except in a royal and civic venue, and who would wish to acquire this work? He had also made a conceptual error: history painting was designed to perpetuate the memory of elevating events that were of general interest (such as a coronation) or emotions whose description would be of general benefit (patriotism or piety). This subject—starvation and despair—was neither instructive nor elevating and was therefore absolutely unsuitable for history painting.

Géricault's projects after the Medusa demonstrate a continued interest in utilizing an empathetic, experiential viewpoint for the presentation of subjects of suffering and social injustice. His chalk drawing Opening of the Doors of the Inquisition (Fig. 56), describing the release of republican prisoners during the Spanish uprising in 1820 against the Bourbon King Ferdinand VII, visually breaks apart the prison world, plunging into the background with the repousse figure who hails his liberators with joyfully upraised arms. The foreground figures form an arc, which rises from the figure on the left, who kneels and listens with timid hope, passes through the slumping prisoner supported by two figures, who exhibits stoic self-control, and curves downward to the woman on the right, whose depression and disbelief have not yet been surmounted and who barely has the strength to embrace her children. As in the Medusa, we see a chain of emotional energy, which reveals the full resonance of the preceding history before this momentary physical conclusion, and which allows the figures to address the audience successively and empathetically.

Géricault died on January 26, 1824. Ary Scheffer painted him on his deathbed. Two leitmotifs appear in Delacroix's journal during the period when he was creating his seminal Massacres at Chios (Fig. 57, Pl. 7): grief for the deaths of Géricault and Byron (who died at Missolonghi on April 9, 1824), and his own struggle to realize a form of painting in which visual language would be liberated from objective representation. Delacroix rejected the Aristotelian unities for poetic evocation. He wished to paint the thoughts of the suffering Greeks who had been defeated at Chios. In this new language, he would speak of...